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To Posterity

Perhaps you will have heard something about me, although it is uncertain whether my poor and obscure name will travel far through time and space. And then perhaps you will want to know what kind of man I was and what happened to the books I wrote, especially those whose reputation has reached you, or of which you have heard some vague report. On the first point, no doubt, there will be various opinions. For almost everyone is driven by their own whims, not the truth, and there is no moderation when it comes to praise or blame.

I was, however, one of your race, a mere mortal man, of neither particularly high nor particularly low origins, although from an ancient family, as Augustus Caesar puts it speaking of himself.[1] In character I was neither vicious nor immodest, except in so far as I was infected by bad behavior in others. Youth deceived me and manhood corrupted me, but age corrected me. Thus I learned from experience the truth of something that I had read much earlier, that is, that youth and pleasure are vanities. Or rather I was given the lesson by the Creator of all times and ages, who sometimes allows wretched mortals to swell up with baseless pride and to go astray solely in order that they may sooner or later become mindful of their sins and come to know themselves. As a young man, I was not especially strong physically but very agile. I do not boast of being exceptionally good-looking, but in my greener years I had a certain appeal. I had a healthy complexion that was neither too pale nor too dark, and quick eyes. My sight was very sharp for a long time, although it became unexpectedly much weaker in my sixties when I had to resort reluctantly to the aid of a lens. My body was always very sound, until the coming of old age beset me with the usual array of ills.

I was a stern despiser of wealth, not because I did not want riches, but because I hated the efforts and worries that are their inseparable companions. I had neither the means for splendid feasts, nor the bother that comes with them, but I lived more happily on a modest diet of plain dishes than all the successors of Apicius[2] with their exquisite repasts. I always found so-called banquets distasteful, considering them excuses for gluttony and inimical to modesty and decency. I thought it was profitless and wearisome to

[1] Suetonius, *The Caesars,* Augustus 2.

[2] Apicius (1st c. CE) was famous as a gourmet and chef. A later collection of Roman recipes is ascribed to him.

invite others for such a purpose and also to accept invitations myself. However, I found the company of my friends such a pleasure that I could think of nothing more satisfying than their visits and never willingly took food without company. I disliked luxury particularly, not merely because it is a bad thing in itself and contrary to humility of spirit, but because it creates difficulties and disturbances. In my youth I was troubled by love of the fiercest kind, although it was a single, honorable love, and I would have been troubled by it for longer if its already cooling fires had not been extinguished by a cruel but beneficent death.[3] I would like to be able to say that I was quite free from physical lust, but I would be lying. I can say with certainty, however, that even when the fervor of youth and my own temperament carried me away, in my heart I always deplored lust as something contemptible. Then, as my fortieth year approached, when I was still quite susceptible, and quite vigorous too, not only did I put aside the obscene act itself but also all memory of it; it was as if I had never looked upon a woman. I count this one of my prime sources of happiness, and thank God who freed me, still hale and flourishing, from a servitude I felt to be so vile and loathsome.

But, to turn to other things, I was aware of pride in others but not in myself. Though I was of slight importance, I always judged myself to be of less. My anger hurt me often enough, others never. I can boast fearlessly—for I know I speak the truth—that I was quickly incensed, but forgot offenses just as quickly, while remembering kindnesses done to me. I eagerly sought out honorable friendships and cherished them faithfully. A torment reserved for age, however, is to have to shed tears with increasing frequency for close friends who have died. I was fortunate, even enviably so, in my familiarity with princes and kings and in my friendships with men of noble rank. But in spite of deep attachments I kept away from many of them. So deeply rooted in me was my love of liberty that I strenuously rejected any who found the word itself unpalatable.[4] The greatest monarchs of my age[5] loved and honored me. I do not know why and guess it was up to them. But sometimes it was not a case of my looking for their company as much as they wanting mine. I was not incommoded by their eminence, but rather derived many advantages from it.

[3] The word Petrarch uses is *adolescentia,* which denotes the ages fourteen to twenty-seven. Laura died in 1348, that is, when he was thirty-four and well into *iuventa* (first manhood), which ran from twenty-eight to fifty. As often with Petrarch, the various dates and time indications he gives do not quite tally with each other. Presumably he wished here both to acknowledge his love for Laura and to relegate it to an earlier phase of his life.

[4] He is presumably defending himself against those who criticized him for accepting the patronage of the Visconti rulers of Milan.

[5] He is probably alluding particularly to Robert of Anjou, king of Naples, and the emperor Charles IV, king of Bohemia.

I had a balanced rather than a penetrating intelligence, one that was fitted for all forms of virtuous, healthy study, but was especially drawn to moral philosophy and poetry. In the course of time I left the latter alone and took great pleasure in the Holy Scriptures, finding a hidden sweetness in them that I had once despised, and treating poetic writing as purely ornamental. Among my many activities I devoted myself particularly to the study of antiquity, since I always disliked the age in which I lived. If love of those dear to me had not pulled me in a different direction, I would have preferred to have been born in any other age and to forget this one, striving always to penetrate other times at least in spirit. So I took pleasure in the historians. When I was disturbed by disagreement between them, I dealt with the problem by following the version of the facts that seemed most probable, or was put forward by the most authoritative writers. My formal speech, some people said, was clear and forceful, although to me it seemed weak and muddled. But really, in ordinary conversation with friends and acquaintances I never aimed at eloquence and am amazed that Augustus Caesar made such a point of it.[6] However, when the topic, the occasion, or the audience seemed to require something more, I did try to raise my tone. How effectively I do not know, and leave judgment to those who were present. For myself, so long as I lived righteously, I set little store by how I spoke. That glory is mere wind that seeks renown only through the glitter of words.

My parents were honorable. Originally from Florence, they were middle-ranking but, to tell the truth, verging on the impoverished. Since they had been driven from their home city, I was born in exile, in Arezzo in the year of our Lord 1304, around dawn on Monday, July 20.

Chance and choice have divided my lifetime so far as follows.[7] I spent not quite the whole of my first year in Arezzo where nature first thrust me into the light of day. My mother's exile having been revoked, the next six were spent at Incisa, about fourteen miles upriver from Florence, on a farm belonging to my father. My eighth year was spent in Pisa, and the ninth and subsequent years in Transalpine Gaul on the left bank of the Rhône in the city of Avignon, where the Roman pontiff has long kept the Church of Christ in disgraceful exile, although it seemed a few years ago that Urban V had restored it to its rightful home.[8] But plainly it all went conspicuously wrong, and, what I find even harder to bear, it did so during his lifetime. It was as if he regretted his good deed. If he had lived a little longer, he would certainly have learned what I thought of his leaving Rome. The pen was already in my hand when he suddenly abandoned both his bid for glory and his very life. What a wretch! What a happy death he could have died before

[6] He has in mind Suetonius, *The Caesars,* Augustus 87.

[7] For more information than Petrarch gives here about his life and career, see Introduction, section 1.

[8] The papal court moved to Avignon in 1309. Pope Urban V moved it back to Rome in 1367, only to return to Avignon in 1370, where he died that December.

the altar of St. Peter and in his proper residence! If his successors had stayed in the papal seat, he would have achieved something of real value. If they had left, his own virtues would have shone out all the more and their guilt would have been correspondingly more evident. But this complaint is taking too much space and is not appropriate here. So there, on the bank of the windswept river,[9] I spent a boyhood that was guided by my parents, and then an entire youth that was guided by frivolous pleasures.

Not that there were not lengthy absences. I lived a full four years of this time in Carpentras, a small town not far to the east of Avignon. In these two places I learned what little grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric I could learn at that age, or what can be learned in schools. You can guess how little that means, dearest reader.

I then went to study law at Montpellier, where I spent another four years. From there I went on to Bologna, where I stayed another three, studying the whole body of civil law.[10] I was a young man who would have gone far, in the opinion of many, if I had persisted. But I abandoned my legal studies completely as soon as the watchful eye of my father was removed. It was not that I rejected the authority of the law, which is indubitably great, and rich in that ancient Roman lore that I love, but human wickedness uses the law to perverted ends. I hated the thought of learning something that I did not want to use dishonestly and that I would find it hard to use honestly. If I had tried to do so, my uprightness would have been put down to naiveté. And so at the age of twenty-two I returned home, by which I mean my place of exile in Avignon, where I had lived since childhood. For habit has almost as much force as nature. I began to be known there and my company to be sought by men of importance. I now confess that I do not know why this happened and am amazed that it did, though at the time I was not at all surprised, thinking, as one does at that age, that I deserved any honors paid to me. I was particularly sought out by members of the famous and noble Colonna family, who frequented the papal court at the time, or, to be more accurate, gave it luster.[11] I was summoned by them to enter their service, and held in an esteem that I am not sure I deserve now, and which I certainly did not deserve then. Giacomo Colonna, a man of incomparable distinction, whose like I have never seen nor will see in the future, was then Bishop of Lombez. I was taken by him to Gascony and spent a summer in the foothills of the Pyrenees that was almost divine, thanks to the delightful company of the master of the house and of the friends we shared. I sigh whenever I think back to it. On my return I entered the service of his brother, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, in which I remained for many years. But he was not so much

[9] The Rhône.

[10] Petrarch studied in Montpellier from 1316 to 1320 and effectively spent six years, not three, at Bologna (1320 to 1326).

[11] For Giacomo and Giovanni Colonna, see Introduction, sections 1 and 5.

a master as a father to me, or rather a very dear brother, and I felt as much at ease as if I were in my own house.

At that time I was full of the restless curiosity of youth, which set me off on travels through France and Germany. Though other reasons were found to justify my departure to my superiors, the real reason was my ardent desire to see as much as I could. My first expedition was to Paris, where I enjoyed separating what was true from what was invention in all the stories told about that city. When I returned I set out for Rome, which I had passionately wanted to see since I was a boy. There I paid my respects to Stefano Colonna, the princely head of his family and a man comparable to the best of the ancient Romans, and was welcomed by him as if there were no difference between me and his sons. The love and affection shown toward me by that outstanding man remained constant right to the end of his life, and is still alive within me, as it will be until I die.[12] Back once again in Avignon, I found the place intolerable. I have a natural aversion to all cities, and Avignon was particularly loathsome. I looked for a refuge as one looks for a port in a storm. I found a little valley, but a solitary and attractive one, called Vaucluse, the closed valley, about fifteen miles from Avignon. The source of the river Sorgue is there, and it is the finest spring in the world. Captivated by the charm of the place, I moved to it with my books, just after the end of my thirty-fourth year.[13]

It would take a long time to tell all that I did there over a period of many years. Suffice it to say that almost every one of my paltry works was completed or begun or conceived there—and they were so numerous that I am still laboring away at them even at the age I have reached now. My mind was like my body, with more agility than strength, and I found many projects that I formulated with ease difficult to carry through and abandoned them. The very appearance of the place suggested the idea of embarking on my woodland work, the *Bucolic Poem,*[14] and the two books of the *Life of Solitude,*[15] which I dedicated to Philippe de Cabassoles. He has always been a remarkable man, but at that time he was the modest Bishop of Cavaillon, not the great Cardinal Bishop of Sabina that he is now.[16] He is the only one of my old friends who is still alive, and has always loved me like a brother, rather than in the Episcopal way in which Ambrose loved Augustine.[17]

[12] Stefano Colonna died sometime between 1348 and 1350.

[13] The move to Vaucluse took place, therefore, in 1337, though he may have acquired the house the previous year.

[14] *Bucolicum carmen.*

[15] *De vita solitaria.*

[16] Philippe de Cabassoles had become a close friend to Petrarch soon after the poet first established himself in Vaucluse, which fell within the diocese of Cavaillon. He was about the same age as Petrarch. He was Cardinal Bishop of Sabina near Rome from 1370 until his death in 1372.

[17] See Augustine, *Confessions* 5.13.

It was while wandering in those mountains one Friday of Holy Week, that the idea came over me with great force of writing a poetic work in the epic manner about the first Scipio Africanus,[18] whose wonderful name had been dear to me since my early years. I took the title from the subject and called it the *Africa*. Either through its good fortune or my own, it won its way into many hearts before it was actually known. I began it with great vigor, but allowed myself to be distracted by other works and broke off.

I was staying in my valley when, by some amazing coincidence, I received two letters on one and the same day. One was from the Senate in the city of Rome and the other from the chancellery of the University of Paris. They contained competing invitations to me to come and be crowned poet laureate in Rome and Paris. Being young still, I reveled in the glory of it all, and judged myself as deserving of the honor as men of such stature judged me to be, giving more weight to others' assessments than to my real merits. For a short while I hesitated which invitation to accept. I wrote to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna asking his advice, and, since he was very nearby, I received a reply to the letter I sent the previous evening before nine o'clock the following morning. Taking his advice, I decided that the authority of the city of Rome had exclusive precedence. I still have the two letters, one seeking advice, the other agreeing to what he suggested.[19] So off I went. I judged my works very indulgently as younger writers do, but I shrank from trusting my own judgment, or even that of those who had invited me, though they certainly would not have invited me if they had not considered me worthy of the honor they had offered. I decided, therefore, to head first for Naples. I presented myself before King Robert,[20] a great philosopher and a great monarch, as illustrious in the realm of letters as in the rule of his country, and the one king of our time to be a friend both to learning and to manly virtue. I wanted him to examine me and pronounce his verdict on me. I am now amazed to think how positively he assessed me and how acceptable he found me, and I think that you, reader, will be just as amazed to learn what happened. It gave him remarkable pleasure to learn why I had come. He recognized my youthful trust in him and perhaps also that the honor I was asking from him could not but redound to his own glory, since I had selected him as the one adequate judge among mortal men. To waste no more words, we had countless exchanges on a variety of topics, and then I showed him my *Africa*, which filled him with such delight that he asked me, as if he were asking a great favor, to dedicate it to him. This I could not refuse, nor did I want to. Then he finally told me a day on which he would deal with the matter for which I had come. He kept me with him from noon to dusk. But

[18] The victor over Hannibal and Carthage in the First Punic War. The Good Friday on which Petrarch claimed to have the first inspiration for the *Africa* was that of 1338 or perhaps 1339.

[19] *Familiares* (*Letters on Familiar Matters*) 4.4 and 4.5.

[20] Robert of Anjou (1275–1343) was king of Naples from 1309. He patronized Giotto and Boccaccio as well as Petrarch.

our discussions ranged ever wider and the time seemed too short, and so he did the same thing on the next two days. After having probed the depths of my ignorance over this three-day period, at the end of the third day he pronounced me worthy of the laurel crown. He offered to crown me in Naples and pressed me repeatedly to agree, but my love for Rome did not yield to the insistence even of so great a king, however much it demanded my respect. And so, seeing that my resolve was inflexible, the king supplied me with letters for the Roman Senate and pronouncements for the Roman Senate, expressing his judgment on me in highly favorable terms.

The king's verdict accorded with what many others thought, including, first and foremost, myself. Today I think that he, I, and all those others who unanimously agreed with us were mistaken, and that the king was swayed more by his affection for me and by his wish to encourage a young man than by a concern for the truth. In the end I went to Rome, and, however unworthy I was, I relied on a verdict of such authority. Buoyed up by it, I received the laurel crown, to an ecstatic reception from those Romans who were able to be present at the ceremony, despite the fact that in reality I was still an unskilled rhetorician.[21] There are letters of mine in verse and prose on all this.[22] My laurels did not bring me wisdom but rather a great deal of envy from others. This too is a lengthier story than there is room for here.

I then left Rome and went to Parma. There I spent a short time with the Da Correggio brothers,[23] who were very generous and upright toward me but in conflict with each other, subjecting the city to a regime without parallel in its previous history, the like of which, I hope, it will never suffer again in this present age.[24] I was mindful of the honor I had received and concerned that it should not be seen as having been bestowed on an unworthy recipient. One day when I happened to be walking up a hill on the far side of the river Enza in territory belonging to the city of Reggio, I reached a wood called Selvapiana. I was struck by the beauty of the spot and, pen in hand, took up the interrupted *Africa*. The inspiration that seemed to have been lost was reawakened. That day I wrote a little and then something more on each of the days that followed. Finally I returned to Parma, found a quiet house off the main thoroughfares—which I later bought and still own—and with a fervor that still astounds me, brought the work to a conclusion in quite a short space of time.[25] I then left Parma and returned to my transalpine solitude.[26]

[21] Petrarch was crowned on April 8, 1341. He left Rome at the end of the month.

[22] *Familiares* (*Letters on Familiar Matters*) 4.7 and 4.8, and *Verse Letters* 2.10.

[23] The quarrelsome Da Correggio brothers took control of Parma days before Petrarch entered the city on May 23, 1341.

[24] That is, in the last age of the world then considered to be underway.

[25] In fact, the poem was never completed.

[26] There is now a gap Petrarch's account, no mention being made of events in his life from 1342 to 1347.

My reputation had long won me the favor of Jacopo da Carrara the Younger,[27] a man of real excellence, who I think, or rather am certain, had no equal among the lords of his time. For years I had been subjected to letters and communications from him, even when I was beyond the Alps and wherever I was in Italy, seeking to establish a friendship with me. Though I hoped for nothing from anyone privileged by fortune, I finally decided to go and see what a great man whom I did not know was so insistent about. So, somewhat tardily, after spending periods in Parma and Verona, and having been treated everywhere—thanks be to God—with much greater consideration than I deserved, I arrived in Padua. My reception by that man who has left such a luminous memory behind him, did not merely show human warmth, but resembled the reception blessed souls must be given in heaven. He was overjoyed and displayed unimaginable affection and concern, so much so that I cannot find adequate words to describe his behavior and will add nothing more. His many acts of kindness to me included (when he learned that I had been a member of the clergy since my youth) arranging for me to become a canon in Padua, so as to bind me more closely both to himself and to his city. All told, if he had lived longer, it would have meant the end of all my wanderings and journeyings. But, alas, there is nothing lasting for mortal men, and any sweetness that befalls has a bitter end. God granted him to me and his city and the world for less than two years, and then took him away. It is not my love for him that deceives me, but neither I nor his city nor the world were worthy of him. He was succeeded by his son,[28] an outstanding man of great practical wisdom, who followed his father in always holding me dear and honoring me. But I had lost one who was much closer to me, not least in years, and I returned to France.[29] I did not know how to stay still, and was driven less by the desire to see again places I had seen a thousand times than to attempt, as sick people do, to cure my ills by changing location.[30]

[27] Jacopo was ruler of Padua from 1345 until his assassination in 1350.

[28] Francesco da Carrara, expansionist ruler of Padua from 1355 until his death as a prisoner of the Visconti in 1392.

[29] Petrarch arrived back in Vaucluse in the summer of 1351. It was to be his last stay there. He moved definitively to Italy in 1353.

[30] The letter is incomplete and undated.